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Shoreline

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Smith Island Watermen and Their Intimate Knowledge of Their Environment

By Aaron Lumpkins

In an era of sophisticated advances in meteorological science the watermen of Smith Island, Maryland, still rely on time-tested environmental cues to help them predict the weather and the incoming harvest of soft crabs. Their knowledge of the environment focuses on the natural rhythms of changing seasons. While difficult to quantify in terms of modern science, their lessons of how to predict changes in the weather are undoubtedly the accumulation of centuries of hard-won wisdom passed down from one generation to the next.

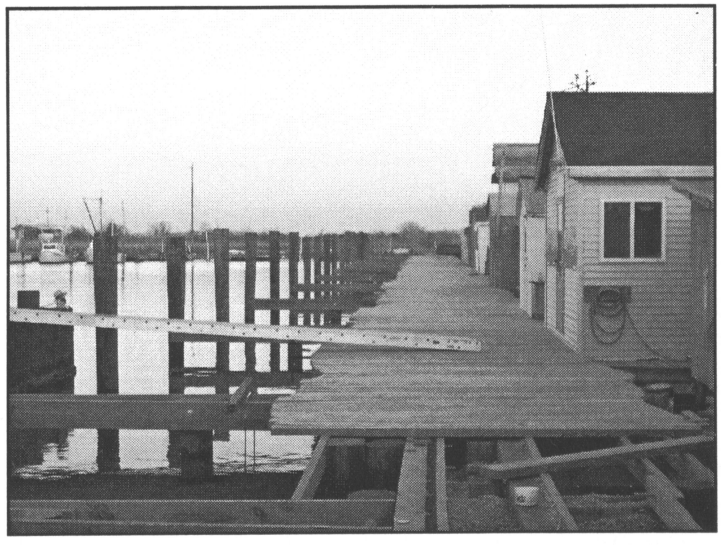
For generations the harvest of soft shell crabs has been the life-blood of the Smith Island economy, and a number of their

environmental traditions focuses on predicting the incoming harvest. The arrival of No-see-ums (sand flies), also referred to by Islanders as "drunkards," alerts watermen that temperatures in their marine environment are warm enough for the crabs to hatch. Yet strong crosswinds will hamper the activity of the No-see-ums, at times making it difficult to read this environmental clue. The snowball bushes (Viburnum Opulus) found on the island also count down the time till harvest through their blossoms. The first full blooms occur near the end of April, after two weeks the blossoms wither and fall off. Once the snowball bushes return to all green, the first shed of soft crabs will shortly follow. Lunar cycles are also important; the first full moon of May reputedly marks the largest shed of soft crabs for the year.

The ability to foretell an onrushing storm from environmental cues can prove invaluable to watermen. Sighting a Sun Dog (parhelion, or bright circular spot next to a solar halo) in the sky signals to a Smith Islander that a hard storm with heavy winds is on its way. A number of local traditions on the island involve predicting rain, which is an obvious concern for an island community that sits only two feet above sea level. Another atmospherically caused optical event that suggests imminent rainfall is when a ring is visible around the moon. When the beaches of Southern Maryland are seen to "loom up," or swell, a Smith Islander knows it's going to rain. When I was last on Smith Island I witnessed this phenomenon; it was coupled with a secondary clue of "sheep on the shore." On Smith Island when the goats are seen eating along the shoreline, a storm is on its way. The goats will fill up on the lush grasses found near the coast before retreating to an inner part of the island to wait out the storm. Nearly a day after I saw the goats grazing near the shore and the looming beaches of Southern Maryland, the Island was beset by a heavy rainstorm.

After long periods of rain, Smith Islanders expect to be beset by heavy winds from the west. Heavy winds, more so than rain, can bring the activities of the watermen to a halt.

This island expression illustrates the point: "Winds from the east fish bite the least, winds from the west fish bite the best." Smith Islanders don't depend solely on one environmental cue to predict the weather or harvest, but when several are seen in conjunction they constitute a better than fair barometer of climate conditions.



Photos by Aaron Lumpkins

Salisbury
UNIVERSITY
Nabb Research Center for Delmarva History and Culture
1101 Camden Avenue
Salisbury, MD 21801-6861
410-543-6312
E-mail: rcdhac@salisbury.edu

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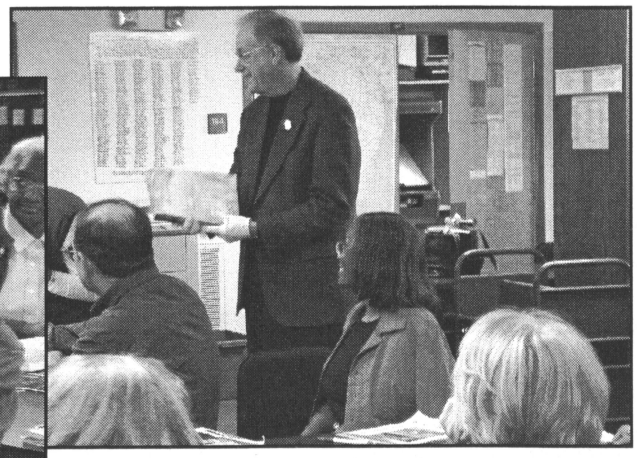
"We're History...Without You"

African-American History Project Launched

Response to the February 18 presentation "'Round the Pond, Georgetown of Salisbury, Maryland" by local historian and author Linda Duyer has been enthusiastic, so much so that the Nabb Center is exploring the idea of a program dedicated to surveying the African-American historical resources of Delmarva. An exploratory roundtable was held with local historians of African-American history and other interested parties on April 8; many outstanding ideas were discussed and explored. The Nabb Center is interested in hearing from others knowledgeable about Delmarva's African-American history. Please contact Heather Burnham at the Nabb Center at heburnham@salisbury.edu or Linda Duyer at lindaduyer1@yahoo.com with your thoughts.



John Creighton, Alexis Dashield, Ann Dashiel, Shirly Jackson and Dr. G. Ray Thompson discuss African-American history on the shore at the Nabb Center.

Upcoming Events:

International Museum Day
Monday, May 18
Ocean City Life Saving Museum, 10 a.m.-5 p.m.
Free admission the entire day!

Pirate Lecture
Wednesday, May 13
Delmarva Discovery Center (Pocomoke, MD), 7 p.m.
Pirates were a global threat and even Delmarva was not immune to piracy. Did you know the first official act of piracy on Delmarva occurred in the 1630s? What two famous pirates landed on Delmarva? What is a picaroon? Was Benjamin Franklin in cahoots with a pirate? Is there really a treasure worth over $10,000,000 buried somewhere on the Peninsula? How does a pirate crew capture a prize from the land? What is the difference between a good pirate and a bad pirate? Come learn the answers to these questions and many more as Sarah Meyers, executive director of Furnace Town Living Heritage Museum, discusses the famous, the infamous and some who history has forgotten in her talk "Pirates of Delmarva."